

Tasmanian Independence

THE CASE FOR COMPLETE INDEPENDENCE FOR TASMANIA.

by
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For want of a better word, this address will use the term, “independence” in preference to secession. “Secession” conjures up all sorts of negative aspects, such as conflict, bitterness, the need to fight for separation, animosity. “Independence” in my mind emits freedom, self-esteem and the expectation to be treated as a full sovereign State among the brotherhood of nations, including the Commonwealth of Australia.

When inspecting the concept of independence, we must look at the steps leading to federation and the prior conditions in the colony. . After doing so, we will look at the situation since federation. Is there enough justification to seek independence? How could it be done? What would the Commonwealth’s response be? How could we not only survive, but survive successfully? It may be that independence will NOT result in a “nightmare”, but usher in, after an obvious period of adjustment, a prosperous, stable and healthy nation. We could remain as a Constitutional Monarchy or if the people decide, through the process of referendum, some form of a republic.

As an author and journalist, I have become aware that there is wide-spread support among Tasmanians for independence, especially among small businesspeople.

Our convict past is an historical fact; from 1803 until 1852 we received nearly 70,000 convicts who were primarily involved in providing cheap labour for public works. In all its harshness and brutality, the groundwork for a peaceful and relatively prosperous Tasmania was laid during those times. By 1856 we were ready and able to progress to the next step. A new broom was sweeping society; gone was the term Van Diemen's Land with all its connotations. On the 1st January of that year, Queen Victoria directed that from then on the name of the colony should be – Tasmania. With the new name came Responsible Government and the first meeting of the House of Assembly was summoned to sit for business, December 2, 1856 with William Champ as our first Premier.

This step meant that the colony of Tasmania, within the British Empire, could administer its own internal affairs and be treated by the other Australian colonies, which also enjoyed responsible government, as an equal. Mother Britain looked after our defences, but not much more. She kept troops here until 1870 but by then we were growing steadily.

With just a population of nearly 90,000 we were a progressive and initiative people. Here it mattered little whether you were Catholic or Protestant, Irish, Scot, English or Welsh; we were Tasmanians All. In 1861 we opened up a telegraph cable with Victoria and were already planning for a railway line between Deloraine and Launceston. By the end of the 1860s primary education was compulsory and trout and salmon lava successfully arrived to fill our rivers and streams for recreational purposes. In 1870 the population was 100,000 and the following year our first railway was in operation. By the mid-1870s, the Hobart-Launceston line was established as were race meetings at Elwick. Our telegraph system was in place, the Tasmanian Government employing American Civil War veteran, John P. Mikesell, to superintend the construction of it. In 1880 the first telephone in Tasmania was established, with a line from Hobart to Mount Nelson. A feeling of optimism prevailed. We were doing well. True there were problems; the railway cost heaps, but our exports to the mainland and Britain were healthy and we were earning loads from our custom tariffs. In 1877 Port Arthur closed and what occurred was a period of relative prosperity with amazing growth, particularly in the mining industry.

Tasmania also saw the building of great architectural works which are still standing, surpassing in beauty, charm and taste modern architectural styles. Those grand buildings of yesterday, built from solid locally produced materials, included public buildings, schools, churches and private dwellings.

The colony's rural industry such as hops, fruit, wheat, sheep, dairy, earned huge wealth. Many of the world's celebrities were attracted to Tasmania, even actor Edwin Booth, brother of John Booth who assassinated President Lincoln. Artists, scientists, novelists and members of the Royal Family included this "pearl in the South Pacific" on their itinerary. Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) called Hobart "one of the cleanest towns anywhere".

In 1890 the University of Tasmania was opened. In sport there were established competitions of Australian Rules, cricket (both male and female) golf, tennis (including Royal Tennis) bowls and the list goes on.

All before federation.

We controlled our own postal, telegraph and communication systems. We had our own flag (1876), military force and navy. We knew no great debt and we enjoyed one of the highest standards of living in the world. True in 1891 we saw the collapse of the Van Diemen's Land Bank which heralded deep economic depression, however, when in 1896 Tattersall's lottery was established in Tasmania by George Adams, we were getting back in business with the colony's government receiving enormous revenue from gambling.



George Adams

By 1899 we were able to send quality volunteers to South Africa to fight in the Boer War, where two of our soldiers earned the Victoria Cross Guy Wylly and John Hutton Bisdee, the first two Australian born to do so.



Boer War Memorials, left Hobart and right, Launceston

Then after much talking and finally a referendum, we joined a federation. The efforts and career of Tasmanian Andrew Inglis Clark in this regard, should be studied. His name, of course, is best remembered for our system of voting, The Hare-Clark System, but his contribution was much, much more. By force of the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900, the colony of Tasmania became a State of the Commonwealth of Australia.

Upon entering federation, Tasmania suffered substantial financial loss. Although we were gradually improving from the 1891 depression, we took another blow at federation when we lost vast revenues from tariffs, as free trade between the States was a condition of federation. Without the enterprise of one man and the common sense of another, Tasmania may well have gone bankrupt.

George Adams was hounded out of a number of other colonies on the mainland because of the anti-gambling lobby. He made his home in Tasmania and it was by the wisdom of the then Premier, Sir Edward Braddon, who invited and welcomed him to the State. Here, Adams set up his "Tatt's Tickets" which he serviced Australia. The financial benefit to the new State Government was enormous and primarily it was this which allowed Tasmania to survive initial federation. Tattersalls operated here until 1954, when it left to re-establish in Victoria, after being enticed to that State by the then Premier Caine, without any knowledge of the Tasmanian State Labour Government.

It soon became apparent that as a small State and somewhat isolated, Tasmania was to have problems with this federation idea, especially with the central government then in Melbourne.

Sir John Evans, Premier of Tasmania (1904-1909), had campaigned for Tasmania to be included in federation. Yet it was not long after that Evans actually said, when speaking of Tasmania's participation in federation, "It is apparent that there is something wrong. We are of course, over-governed" (i.e. by the central government).

This increasing interference by the Federal Government was recognised by other States. In a leading article of the early 1930s, a Melbourne daily made mention of the "terrifying governing octopus" emanating from the Commonwealth Government.

As early as 1931, there were calls for, "Tasmania to withdraw from the Commonwealth and become a self-governing Dominion of the British Empire" (Dominion League of Tasmania newspaper, April 23). One of the main proponents of independence was colourful Labor Party journalist and politician, Edmund Dwyer-Gray who served a term as Premier in 1939. Dwyer-Gray "deplored the conditions of the Tasmanian Treasury" brought about, he said, by the effects of common Federal Finance, Legislation and Administration. He called for "Justice for Tasmania – or secession". Dwyer-Gray was a strong supporter of the Dominion League. The League's newspaper was well produced, well subscribed to and carried a healthy assortment of advertising from Tasmanian business houses. By this time the Western Australian Government had petitioned the Imperial Government to withdraw from the Commonwealth Government after a successful referendum. The Imperial Government refused to accept the petition. The League openly sought independence for Tasmania, but as a nation, slowly climbing out of the Great Depression and with war clouds forming, it gradually floundered.



Edmund Dwyer-Gray

The erosion, however, of State powers and sovereignty continued, culminating with the Commonwealth Powers Act. In 1942 the Commonwealth Government through the Federal Attorney-General, Dr Evatt, believed that if Australia was to effectively fight the war, the States would have to surrender certain powers. All the States agreed, supported by both major parties. One man stood alone, our own Legislative Councillor, Joseph 'Jo' Darling, a very handsome, Australian left-handed cricketer, who said: "The Federal Government has too much power already". Gradually Darling, despite intense pressure, received support which finally resulted in a referendum on the matter which the Commonwealth Government lost.

Since the war there have been many tussles between State Governments and the central government and Tasmania has often been on the receiving end. In 1970, the late Bill Hodgman LC, was urging "Tasmania to go it alone" if Commonwealth-State relations did not improve. In 1981, a Labor Parliamentarian, Bill McKinnon, said that the viability of independence should be looked at. He was endorsed by Premier Doug Lowe who said that "secession might have to be considered".

Consideration was serious during the famous Franklin below Gordon Dam debate. During the 1980s Robin Gray seriously considered the concept because of the continual clash between Tasmania and the Federal Government, mainly over forestry concerns. In an interview with The Age Newspaper, Mr Gray is quoted as saying in reference to secession, "We could have duty free arrangements, we could have all sorts of trade agreements. If they would let us have our economic independence, subject to a reasonable period for the transition to take place, Tasmania would be much better off. He added that Tasmania could survive adequately without Federal Government money and the Federal Government's interference was the only thing holding back the State increasingly confident and aggressive businessmen."



Premier Robin Gray

In the year of 1990 the Burnie branch of the Liberal Party called for an investigation into the merits of Tasmania seceding from Australia. The following year we saw the short establishment of the First Party of Tasmania, under Mr Stephen Dado with a dual purpose – secession and becoming duty free. Outspoken Parliamentarian, Michael Hodgman in a press release (14/9/92) said, the “Keating Government’s handling of the Bender Quarry case” increased support for “Tasmanian secession”. In 1993 the Premier Mr Ray Groom warned that if the States were abolished, Tasmania would secede.



Michael Hodgman (left) and Reg

A number of years ago we have seen the efforts of former Premier of Queensland, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, planning Tasmania’s secession.

The author of this work during the early years of the 1990s conducted his own survey on people’s reaction to independence. Positive responses were received State-wide and what was surprising was that the responses received were from people of all political opinions and persuasions. Support for continuation of

Constitutional Monarchy or for a Republic was about fifty fifty. Most who responded were over 30 years of age and about two thirds of those were male.

There are those who wish us no good will. In 2018 then NSW Liberal Democrats senator David Leyonhjelm called for Tasmania to be thrown out of the Australian Federation calling Tasmania a “beggar state” adding that we are dependent on the rest of the country. This then is the sad state we are now in.

In summary we have seen that Tasmania since federation has a history of seeking or at least discussing, independence. We have also learnt that there are presently sufficient people who, if not openly supportive of independence, are willing to study it as a viable alternative.

BUT JUST HOW COULD WE CLAIM INDEPENDENCE?

It is true that the Australian Constitution has no clause which allows States to “opt” out; therefore, legal withdrawal from the Commonwealth is debatable. When Western Australia in the 1930s went to the British Parliament, the request was refused on the ground that it was constitutionally impossible.

Things have changed since the 30s. No longer, has Britain any Constitutional hold over Australia. (Australian Constitution; The Westminster Act 1931; Statute of Westminster Adoption Act 1941; the Australia Act 1986) and as the Commonwealth Government has signed, often without dialogue with the States, covenants and treaties with outside bodies such as the United Nations, it can be charged that the central government has not lived up to its side of the bargain. Many of these (in excess) 2,000 covenants and treaties infringe upon State domains and have altered the Constitution without referendum. To be blunt, the Constitution is a contract entered into; contracts can be broken, especially when the other signatory (i.e. the Commonwealth) have reneged on its responsibilities. We simply, declare our independence.

Firstly, however, and importantly any move to independence must be only with the consensus of the people and this can be achieved through referendum on a simple “Yes” or “No” question, coinciding with a State election.

Independence for Tasmania from Australia would move rather smoothly. For instance there would be no problems with arranging or squabbling over borders and there is no reason why relations with the rest of Australia should not be co-operative,

cordial and convenient to both sovereign nations. Our Premier would then become Prime Minister elected constitutionally by the People of Tasmania and our State flag would remain the same if the people so desired. The Governor of Tasmania would remain as executive head of our State. As an independent country, we could join the Commonwealth of Nations.

The initial question is: WHAT WOULD BE CANBERRA'S REACTION TO ANY DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE?

Taking the line that they would oppose independence (but would they?) there are various options they could put into effect.

Invading would be one, by quickly taking control of all communication centres and seats of government. This would be, in the author's opinion, unlikely. The act would be unpopular with the other States – and secondly, while not reflecting upon the calibre of our fighting personnel, our present Defence Forces may not have the capacity for an invasion.

Canberra could quite effectively (initially at least) enforce trade, transport and communication sanctions. This strong possibility would have to be taken into account.

BUT COULD AN INDEPENDENT TASMANIA SURVIVE?

Yes! Tasmania has great agricultural, industrial and human potential. Its natural resources are quite extensive. We have a lot more going for us than say, Iceland which is comparable in size and less in population, yet has one of the highest living standards in the world. Iceland has few natural resources except for fishing, which they jealously guard. We can do the same. Ireland survives, as does Switzerland which is much smaller than Tasmania. Taiwan, which is half the size of Tasmania with few natural resources (except for its people), has so much money they don't know what to do with it. Singapore. It is a fallacy that it is necessary to be big to survive; there is something in the saying, "small is beautiful".

There have been all sorts of suggestions how we could financially survive. It is certain that our new Tasmania could only sustain or improve its standard of living under conditions of reduced Government. There would therefore be a shift in employment from the government to the private sector. Suggestions of duty free ports have been made besides making Tasmania a banking haven like Switzerland

and as Hong Kong's future is suspect, we could possibly fill the vacuum. True while Hong Kong is one of the "keys" to Asia and we are geographically situated at the end of the world, electronic transfer and technological advancement make distances irrelevant.

We are a wealthy State. Tasmania has more export income per head of population than any other State and we are the second State behind Queensland as regards export income.

A Parliamentary Research Paper entitled, "Secession of Tasmania from Australia" (1990) goes deeply into economic matters and suggests how we can replace services which are funded by the Commonwealth such as social security and the like. In actual fact the amount of taxes collected by the Commonwealth from Tasmania and the money delivered back to the State by Canberra is not all that different and the short-fall could be raised by various means.

There is another possible, but unique way we could survive. The example set is called the "Guernsey experiment". Guernsey, an island in the English Channel, was in the early 1800s in debt, possessed no natural resources, trade or employment. They could not borrow any money. To overcome their problem they issued their own credit through State Notes. This way the island enjoyed debt-free credit to undertake any public works and had no inflation. The notes were issued and cancelled according to the community's requirements. Prices of goods were lower than elsewhere in Britain and as time progressed other notes were issued and visitors poured into the island and with increased trade the island enjoyed a new found prosperity. Thanks to the exceptionally low taxation and import duties, Guernsey still enjoys low prices, plenty of money and a high standard of living. In consequence Guernsey can afford to leave worries about inflation to the debt-ridden mainland.

Is a lesson to be learnt here? Should Tasmania issue its own credit by the government through a proper State Bank with the credit backed up by our own bountiful resources such as our mineral, industrial, agricultural and human potential? Certainly it could. A few years ago I accompanied the past Fisheries State Minister, Neil Robson, at an address before the Legislative Council. During that address, he said the instrument to do so, is already there, through the State Savings Bank of Tasmania. Now, of late, we have seen the sad demise of our own State Bank when it was taken over by the Colonial, which in turn has been taken over by the Commonwealth Bank, once referred to as the 'People's Bank'. A most interesting Tasmanian (although born in Canada), King O'Malley, was one of the founders of the 'People's Bank'. He would turn in his grave to see what it has become today. It was

the Commonwealth Bank that financed, among other things, the 1914/18 war effort to the tune of \$350m debt free. However, even though there is no longer a State Bank, it would be quite easy to set up one for the purpose of issuing currency.

The new nation of Tasmania would have to take over various responsibilities which presently rest with the Commonwealth, such as defence, immigration and even weather forecasts. There is always the possibility as an independent nation to come to a convenient understanding with the United States offering defence facilities for its fleet and Antarctic facilities not only to America, but to any friendly power. Perhaps a proviso can be made with the U.S. that they accept our fruit during their off seasons, thereby ensuring Americans have fresh fruit all the year round and our growers a ready and huge market.

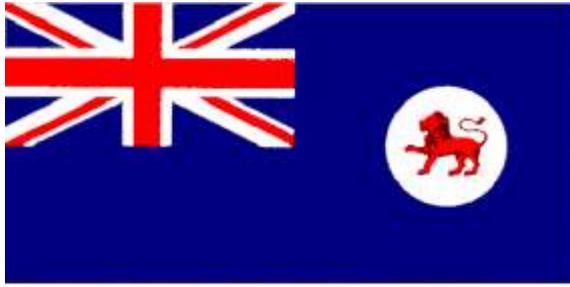
There are plenty of examples where new independent countries have cordial relations with the parent country and the British Commonwealth is a good example of this. Our relation to Australia could be friendly and as mentioned before, co-operative.

I would now like to add a warning. In my opinion there are concerted moves for Tasmania to actually lose its State status and be absorbed by the State of Victoria. On a visit to northern Tasmania in February 2001, well known academic, Prof Blainey when broaching the subject, said it would not work. I have even heard Tasmanians not only support this, but suggest it. Surely, I say, we can govern ourselves. If, indeed, we cannot govern ourselves – if we are too stupid, untalented and hopeless in determining our own destiny, then yes, let some-one else govern us. But we are unique and we attractive to the outside world because we are ‘different’ and not the same as anywhere else. By being governed by Victoria we would lose our identity as are our various municipalities because of forced amalgamation. It is an absurd idea being governed by Victoria! Remember Melbourne was founded by Tasmania, when John Batman left our northern shores to do so.

On the July 11, 2020 The Mercury newspaper carried my thoughts of independence for Tasmania when Tasmanian economist Saul Eslake said Tasmanian independence “would be a bad thing because of the financial support we would lose from the rest of the country” adding that our social security system is funded by the rest of mainland taxpayers.

We are a rich state or should be. With leadership, innovation and thinking beyond the *square*, we can be once again.

We have a very different history to that of Victoria. Ours is unique to Australia.



Could we then in the not too distant future be saying: *“Ladies and Gentlemen. Please be up standing. Raise your glasses and toast the Independent Nation of Tasmania. God preserve it and long may it survive!”*



Reg A. Watson